

# Sex Workers

Historically, sex workers have been considered at high risk for the transmission of HIV. In the United States, with the exception of some areas of Nevada, sex work is illegal and very little research is conducted on sex workers or their clients (Avert, 2007). The illegality, as well as varying definitions of sex work, makes it difficult to determine the number of people involved. It is estimated that over one million people in the U.S. have worked as prostitutes, including about one percent of American women (Prostitution Education Network, 2007). In 2004, the World Health Organization (WHO) determined that many of the HIV cases in the United States, that do occur amongst sex workers, are attributed to injection drug use rather than sex (WHO, 2004). Sex work has been described as a powerful force in the drug economy, (Anderson, 2005) and, although research is limited, the combination of multiple unknown partners (Brewer et al., 2000) and substance abuse is a particular concern for the transmission and spread of HIV and other STDs.

According to the WHO, the following factors heighten sex workers' risk of HIV infection (WHO, 2004):

- stigmatization and marginalization
- limited economic options, in particular for

Effective key strategies that have been identified for HIV/AIDS prevention and care programs among sex workers (WHO, 2004)

- promotion of safer sexual behavior among sex workers, clients and institutions
- promotion and availability of STD prevention and care services
- outreach work that includes health, social and legal services
- peer education among sex workers, clients and associated groups
- care of people living with HIV/AIDS
- advocacy for policy and law reform at national and local levels

women

- limited access to health, social and legal services
- limited access to information and prevention services
- gender-related differences and inequalities
- sexual exploitation and trafficking
- harmful, or lack of protective, legislation and policies
- exposure to risks associated with lifestyle such as violence, substance abuse and mobility

There are numerous challenges to effectively address HIV/AIDS among sex workers. The population is diverse and the reasons for entering into sex work are numerous. In general, sex work thrives in an environment that has a high concentration of people who are sexually active, where sufficient anonymity is ensured where high ratios of males to females exist, and in areas where there is socioeconomic disparity. This disparity creates an environment where sex work is affordable by the client and provides economic opportunity for the worker. The WHO recommends that prevention strategies incorporate three levels of response: prevention of entry into sex work, protection of those involved in sex work and assistance in exiting sex work (WHO, 2004).

## REFERENCES

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